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11-17-2010

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Recommended Citation

Johanningsmeier, Charles and Edwards, Sarah K., "Midlands Voices: Student literacy gets major boost" (2010). *Teacher Education Faculty Publications*. 55.

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Published Nov 17, 2010

Published Wednesday November 17, 2010

Midlands Voices: Student literacy gets major boost

By Charles Johanningsmeier and Sarah Edwards

Dr. Johanningsmeier is a professor in the UNO English Department who teaches a wide variety of writing and American literature courses. Dr. Edwards is an associate professor at the University of Nebraska at Omaha who teaches courses in secondary literacy, effective teaching strategies and culturally responsive teaching.

A glance at local and national media might lead one to believe there's little good news about secondary schools and the literacy skills of their students: Low test scores. Few students reading for pleasure. Their inability to think incisively or write coherently.

Here in the metropolitan Omaha area, however, there is a major effort under way to support the reading and writing skills for high school and middle school students.

For the past year, an organization called METLink — a partnership of UNO's College of Education and College of Arts and Sciences with area middle and high schools — has been actively working with area English teachers to help improve the ways they teach students.

The program has been greeted with open arms by teachers, as was evident on Saturday, Nov. 6, when more than 130 area teachers, representing 11 public and private school districts, attended the second annual METLink conference at UNO's Thompson Alumni Center. On a beautiful fall day, these educators willingly gave up a significant part of their weekend (without pay) simply because they are committed to enhancing their own skills and boosting the achievement levels of their students.

One of the highlights of the conference was the keynote presentation by Kelly Gallagher, the author of four books on teaching English in secondary schools. In his most recent book, "Readicide: How Schools Are Killing Reading and What You Can Do About It" (2009), Gallagher attributes the lack of progress in improving students' reading and writing skills in recent years not only to the usual culprits of poverty, low parental involvement and electronic media distraction but also to some practices that teachers might unwittingly be engaged in that discourage students from reading for pleasure.

However, Gallagher also singled out the overemphasis on high-stakes quantitative testing as one of the most important factors damaging students' reading and writing skills. He argued that these tests are creating graduates whose chief goal in reading is to "comprehend" written passages and do well on tests, not think critically about texts.

Gallagher asserted, too, that teachers, under pressure from their school districts, are reinforcing this harmful attitude toward reading by engaging in practices designed solely to improve students' test scores rather than make them active, interested and independent learners.

We couldn't agree more. Federal and state policies that force schools to overvalue students' performance on assessment tests are killing students' interest in reading and, quite ironically, thereby reducing their abilities to read, write and think. Students are thus not graduating from high school with the high-level reading and thinking skills necessary to keep the country economically competitive.

Traditionally, one of the best aspects of the American school system has been its ability to create students who, by questioning what they read and being encouraged to be creative in their responses to literary works, become independent thinkers who consequently produce all kinds of innovations in the world after graduation.

Sadly, however, multiple-choice state and national reading assessments are instead training students for low-paying jobs that require little more than the ability to follow directions correctly and to comprehend simple texts. Except in the service sector, such jobs generally can be done more cheaply overseas.

METLink is committed to helping area English teachers foster a love of reading in their students and teach those students how to think and write at high levels of proficiency. It does this not only by offering a highly successful annual conference but also by mentoring teachers in their second and third years on the job.

What we hope more people recognize, however, is that in the metro area, there are already hundreds of dedicated high school and middle school English teachers who work hard every day to prepare interesting classes, get students excited about reading, grade the many papers they assign in order to improve students' writing abilities and strengthen their own teaching skills.

And that's the kind of news we think should be reported more often.